

An Agur Attitude

Proverbs 30:1-9

¹The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh – an oracle:

This man declared to Ithiel,
to Ithiel and to Ucal:

I can read your minds. You're thinking to yourself, "Not another sermon on Agur! Agur, Agur, Agur! All I ever hear are sermons on Agur!" Okay, you caught me. You're probably not suffering from Agur overload? In fact, how many of you are actually thinking something more like, "Who in the world is Agur, and what possessed the preacher to want to talk about him?"

I cannot definitively answer the first half of that question. Whoever Agur was is lost to history. Temple tradition taught that Agur was an allegorical name for Solomon. Agur meant "a collector." His father's name, Jakeh, meant "very religious." It seemed obvious that a collector of proverbs who was the son of someone very religious just had to be Solomon, the son of David. Another theory suggests that Agur was not an Israelite, but a descendant of Ishmael, Abraham's son and Isaac's half-brother. Ishmael's descendants were also known for collecting proverbs.

I think the simplest and most likely identity for Agur is that he was just one of many wise men during Israel's "age of the sage" in the days of Solomon. All we can know about him from the text is his name, his father's name and the names of two fellows he spoke to at least once. I cannot identify Agur beyond all reasonable doubt but I can answer what possessed this preacher to talk about him. You heard the text read. That was good stuff for walking contently with God. The writer claims that his words are divinely inspired, for an "oracle" was a prophetic utterance.

Agur was a man who had learned to be content with what he could and could not know. He teaches us how to live in awe of the majesty of God. He teaches us how to cherish the very notion that the Creator would reveal Himself to the creature. He challenges us to be satisfied with God's provision for our lives, not murmuring about what we lack and not coveting more than God wants us to have. Old Testament Agur harmonizes very nicely with New Testament teaching, so let us now examine this Agur attitude that empowers a person to truly live this life to its fullest.

I. Admit Your Limitations in God's World (2-4)

A. God Produces Wisdom, Not *Vice Versa* verses 2, 3

²I am the most ignorant of men;

I do not have a man's understanding.

³I have not learned wisdom,

nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.

Perhaps, Agur's self-abasing words came as the result of a great quest for meaning, much like that of Solomon in the book of Ecclesiastes. Perhaps, there is a touch of sarcasm directed toward Ithiel and Ucal, to whom he was speaking. These two men may have been Agur's disciples or his sons, but they may also have been adversaries in a debate with Agur, much like the so-called "comforters" of Job who were determined to analyze and explain God in the midst of Job's misfortunes rather than simply comfort their suffering friend. Job got a bit sarcastic with them at times. In any event, Agur is conceding, "I don't know as much as the dumbest man, but that itself drives me to humbly recognize that God is beyond man's ability to search Him out.

In a sense, the quest for meaning, for truth and for “god” is universal, but only in a sense. From Paul’s vantage point in his letter to the Romans, there is “... no one who seeks God” (Romans 3:11). Paul explained the apparent inconsistency this way. Much truth about God is evident simply in what has been created. But, God’s wisdom and righteousness evident in the creation were too restraining on a self-willed race, so mankind rebelled against those things. Having cast off the truth, wisdom, righteousness and meaning that God did make known, they renewed their quest for those same things. It’s actually a bit bizarre. No wonder that Paul observed, “Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ...” (Romans 1:22). Through fallen human wisdom, man thinks he can find God, but the Scriptures teach that wisdom starts with God:

¹⁰The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all who follow his precepts have good understanding. – Psalm 11:10

B. A Humble Spirit Is a Praising Spirit verse 4a

⁴Who has gone up to heaven and come down?
Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his hands?
Who has wrapped up the waters in his cloak?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?

These are what Dave Mueller likes to call Sunday School questions, where the answer is always “God,” “Jesus” or something like that. One Sunday School teacher asked, “Who has a long furry tail, lives in trees and stores nuts for the winter?” The little boy answered, “Since this is Sunday School, the answer is probably Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me.”

These are rhetorical questions in that the answers are obvious. “Who has gone up to heaven and come down? **Answer: God!** “Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his hands?” **Answer: Not you!** These words are very “Job-like” – almost a *Reader’s Digest* condensed version of Job 38-41, when *JEHOVAH* Himself tired of listening to the clueless speculations of Job’s friends and began to challenge them along the lines of “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations?” (Job 38:4). Agur’s questions look to God and are indirect expressions of praise.

Do you realize how much pressure is lifted when a man decides to just enjoy God’s creation and let God be God, When Agur couples these expressions of praise with his confessions of his own ignorance, I suspect that he finds it quite liberating. The quest for meaning and truth shifts and becomes less complicated. Rather than trying to discover these things in his arrogant human wisdom while denying what Creation tells him about God, Agur embraces what has been made known. He marvels in God’s creative might and the quest shifts. He is no longer asking, “What is God like?” for he now delights at creation’s answers. Now, he asks, “Can I be at peace with this God?”

C. A Humble Spirit Is a Yearning Spirit verse 4b

What is his name, and the name of his son?
Tell me if you know!

Whether Agur’s tone is one of perfect praise or even if it is diluted with a touch of sarcasm toward Ithiel and Ucal, these words evidence a longing to know more of God. To the ancients, the name of a person was far more than a label. It described whatever character could be determined about that person. But, to ask for the name of God’s son is to ask for the identity of Someone Who might represent God to Agur, Someone Who might bridge the realm, so to speak, of heaven and earth?

I am not suggesting that Agur was expecting or anticipating that God would come to the earth to make Himself known, only that He was yearning that something like that might happen. But, bear in mind, this was a prophetic oracle. It seems to me that the Holy Spirit certainly gave Agur an utterance that would reflect and anticipate the coming of Jesus. Jesus is identified in the New Testament writings as the *Logos*, or the Word of God. Jesus would be God's self-revelation, a full utterance that describes Him. Agur was longing to know if there is such a Person. In Jesus, the Father answered, "Yes, there is a such a Mediator between mankind and heaven."

¹In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. – Hebrews 11:1, 2

II. Affirm Your Loyalty to God's Word (5, 6)

A. When God Does Speak, We Must Cherish Every Word verse 5

⁵"Every word of God is flawless;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.

The more a man reconciles himself to his own creaturely status, the less he will attempt to posture himself as all knowing. In other words, he will be content to fill the role of a man and he will let God fill the role of God. When all that is settled, he will delight in the notion that God can be known, not through the pursuits of human wisdom, but through whatever means God sees fit to reveal himself. We have already considered his attitude of praise and wonder, which insinuates that he detects something of God through the things that have been created. Here, he voices his trust and delight that God has made Himself known through additional revelation.

By "every word of God," Agur is certainly referring to the *Torah*, the Hebrew Scriptures of his day through which God made Himself known to and by which He covenanted with the Israelite nation. He may also have had in mind the prophetic oracles that God worded to His people through certain divinely appointed men. Because of our creatureliness and especially, because of our sinfulness, when God speaks, it is a big deal, and we do well to pay very close attention.

"Every word of God is flawless." "Flawless" means "pure." The word described refined metal. When God speaks, His words are not like our words. There is no error or moral ambiguity. There is nothing remotely untrustworthy in anything He has said. His word is a "shield" of refuge for all who trust Him. We are not at the mercy of our own vain and human speculations. Sometimes, those who are wise in their own eyes ridicule those who trust the Word of God, accusing them of hiding behind the Bible. To the man who trusts the Word of God, there is no safer place to hide.

B. We Must Bend Ourselves to God's Word, Not *Vice Versa* verse 6

⁶Do not add to his words,
or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.

Bible literacy may be at an all-time low. This was demonstrated by one of *Tonight Show* host Jay Leno's "man-on-the street" interviews. When, he asked, "Can you name one of the Ten Commandments?" one college-age woman replied, "Freedom of speech?" Next, Leno said, "Complete this sentence: Let he who is without sin ..." A second young woman responded, "Have a good time?" Mr. Leno then turned to a young man and asked, "Who, according to the Bible, was eaten by a whale?" Exuding confidence, the answer was, "Pinocchio."

If, as Christians, we believe that God has spoken through His Scriptures, then obviously, we have a very precious resource at our disposal. The only wise course for us is to humbly approach it so as to be filled with its truth. We add to his words when, like the Pharisees in Jesus' day, we impose on others as binding the conclusions that we read into the Bible. We have a tendency to overstate it. Sometimes, we have a tendency to understate it. I have even known a number of fascinating people who have a remarkable knack of overstating some parts of it for the purposes of judging the activities of others while understating other parts that restrict their own agendas.

The wise individual who really trusts that God has spoken will take seriously the task of rightly applying His words. Consider what folly it is to handle the Word of God loosely so as to accommodate our human agendas. Think of the position to which we are exalting ourselves. We are right back where we began, wise enough in our own minds to play God. Agur's advice is that if God has spoken, all that makes sense is to align ourselves as closely to His words as we can.

III. Accept Your Lot from God's Wealth (7-9)

A. Agur Does Not Wish to Review His Life with Regrets toward God verses 7, 8a

⁷"Two things I ask of you, O LORD;
do not refuse me before I die:
⁸Keep falsehood and lies far from me ...

"Before I die" might sound as if Agur only wished for a solitary experience of life in perfect balance. The sense of his prayer is more likely that this balance will begin now and endure to the end of his days. He wants to be remembered as a man of integrity. At the end of his life, he does not want the record of his dealings with others to show him to be anything less. He wants to be known of as a man of integrity in men's eyes and a man of inward holiness in the eyes of God.

The falsehood from which Agur petitioned God to buffer him was falsehood of all kinds. He desired to be upright in his own dealings as well as sheltered from the lies of others. I suspect that he also wanted to stand firm against the falsehood of his age. Israel in that day was not the Israel God desired. Idolatry and materialism were taking hold. In the same way, the wisdom of our age stands opposed to the statutes of God. Integrity is not common. Someone has said, "A commentary on the times is that the word 'honesty' is now preceded by "old-fashioned."

Looking to the previous verses. "Every word of God is flawless ..." The key to looking back at the end of one's days without regrets is to live every day by the word of God.

B. Agur Desires to Avoid the Spiritual Pitfalls of Extremes verses 8b, 9

... give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
⁹Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
and say, "Who is the LORD?"
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God.

This is an amazing prayer. A lot of people pray, “Help me, I need more.” Not so many people pray, “But don’t give me too much.” According to a survey conducted by the American Council on Education in 1987, 75% of 200,000 incoming freshmen polled felt that being well off financially is either an “essential” or a “very important” goal. And, 71% said the key reason they were going to college was so they could get high paying jobs when they graduate. Only 39% felt that it was important to develop a meaningful philosophy of life. But, Solomon warned:

¹⁰Whoever loves money never has money enough;
whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. – Ecclesiastes 5:10

Perhaps, some do, but most of us do not really understand abject poverty; the kind that compels a man to make excruciating choices such as whether to pay the rent or buy groceries, put gas in the car or walk to the store and buy school clothes, go to the doctor or pay the utilities. Our experience is more akin to the little girl in an exclusive Hollywood private school catering to the stars who was assigned to write an essay on poverty. Her introduction was telling: “Once there was a poor little girl. Her father was poor. Her mother was poor. Her nanny was poor. Her chauffeur was poor. Her butler was poor. In fact, everybody in the house was very, very poor.”

Agur recognized danger in financial extremes. If a person has too much, he will be tempted toward an attitude of self-sufficiency. He will be tempted to forget that God is the one who bestows some people with a knack for acquiring wealth. He will be tempted toward greed. He will be tempted toward deceit if that is what seems to be required to hang onto wealth. If he is a Christian individual, he will be tempted not to take great risks on behalf of the kingdom of God.

Certainly, some godly rich people have effectively resisted such temptations, but most of us are in Agur’s shoes. We might like to think that were we rich, we would be great servants of the kingdom, but in our heart of hearts, we don’t have a clue. But neither could Agur be sure that he would be any better of a man if he were poor. He does not idly boast, “Why, I’d never...” He confesses, “Poor enough, who knows what I might resort to? I might steal and dishonor God.” And, there are other ways that we might dishonor God if everything was taken from us. We might lie. We might cheat. We might murmur against God for our sorry station in life.

Yesterday, you bought a lottery ticket and prayed for a win. Good luck, but today I hope you’ll pray, “Lord, I didn’t mean it. I don’t want one thin dime more than You know that I can manage to Your glory.” Nobody prays that way, but Agur did and he did so under divine inspiration.

“Goal-driven” is a commendable phrase when it appears on a personnel evaluation. We admire people who set goals and pursue them relentlessly. But some goals may keep us from seeing where we are in terms of where God wants you to be. We become impatient with delays and fearful when obstacles appear in “our” paths. But, what about “God’s path” for us? The best goal in life is be exactly where God wants is to be, and Agur reveals the keys to getting there. They are the humility that allows God to be God, obedience to God’s Word and contentment with the provision for our lives that God knows to be most conducive to His glory and our ultimate good.